

grabbed the Marine's condom out of his hand and threw it on the floor and strapped him on and gave him a ride he would not soon forget. And an hour later (so young, he was so young) she gave him another one. And when her ex-boy-friend Steve came knocking on her door (like she'd hoped he would) sniffing around for a little pussy, she let him in, let him see the Marine with the bright fresh tattoos sleeping in a tangle of blankets on her storm-tossed bed.

THEY DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HISTORY

The boys from the Burger 'N' run, the store managers and the district manager of Zone 17 (Vista, Escondido and Loma Alta) were in high spirits after their night of dinner and drinks that culminated with a raucous stop at the topless place down on the old coast route. After district manager Wally Herzog carried one of the dancers out of the club on his shoulders, he and the guys all piled into his company car and screamed down old Highway 101 to Burger 'N' Run #31, Loma Alta's coast route store, to get some burgers to soak up all the beer. They pushed and tripped and stumbled through the restaurant's front door, and honcho Wally vaulted the counter, slipped and fell on a strawberry milk shake that had fallen on the floor sometime in the middle of the dinner rush; he then got up and grabbed Kim Rubio, the drive-thru girl, and tried to give her a big wet kiss on the lips. But Kim fended him off; she had a boy-friend who beat her (she wore the remnant of a shiner, a purple half moon under her left eye, that night) and she did not take beatings lying down. After going one-on-one with Ruben Cerda, fending off Wally Herzog's clumsy and drunken advance was a piece of cake; she slammed a forearm into his nose and kneed him in the groin. The forearm did the most damage, sent Wally shuffling in a ball-aching hunch back through the kitchen to the deep sink with his two hands cupped in front of his nose to catch the stream of blood.

"Hey, girlie," said the manager of Burger 'N' Run #32, Escondido's Mission Avenue store. "That's the goddamn district manager you just hit; he could fire your dumb ass."

"I'm shakin'," said Kim, and though she tried not to show it, she was, not at the thought of getting fired, but at the surge of adrenalin she'd gotten from the unexpected hand-to-hand combat. She put the surge to work by stomping back to the manager's office and barking at the night manager, "I ain't cleaning that asshole's blood off the floor; fucker might have AIDS for all I know."

The night manager, Ellis Leahy, dropped the pile of dollar bills he'd been counting and said, "Blood?"

Back out front, the manager of Burger 'N' Run #32 said to the manager of Burger 'N' Run #30, Vista's South Santa Fe Avenue store, "The girl's history." He was temporarily right. The district manager ordered night manager Leahy to fire the girl. Mr. Leahy sent the girl home and filled out the paperwork but, when the guys had gone, the termination form went into the trash can, and the night manager called Kim and told her to come back in to work the next day, that he was giving her a raise for, "Punching that shithead's lights out like I wish I had the balls to do."

Kim would have told him to get fucked, but she knew that without a job (no matter how shitty) she would sink into an inertia that might, over the long run, kill her, so she said, "O.K., boss; how much of a raise?"

ELLIS TAKES A BATH BEFORE HE EVEN GETS TO VEGAS

Ellis put his foot to the floor and blew through San Bernardino like it was standing still. He made the high desert by dusk, switched the Oldsmobile into cruise control on the arrow-straight freeway, leaned back, slid Duke Ellington's Indigos into the tape deck, draped his right arm across the seat top and said to no one, "Look out, Vegas, here I come."

He stopped in Victorville for gas and a burger and coke, then he lunged onto the freeway again. He'd planned on going non-stop from Victorville to Vegas, but ten miles outside the Nevada border his headlights caught — for just a second, a flash of white in the dark night — a naked woman on the side of the road. He braked the Olds to a stop as quickly as his seventy miles per hour would allow, then he backed the car up along the shoulder. He parked on the spot where he thought he'd seen her and walked ten yards into the dark desert. He didn't see her; he saw only the lunar hills and the bright stars above the horizon. When he turned to go back to the Olds, a small voice cried out, "Can you help me?" He turned around and peered into the darkness and said, "Where are you?" The voice answered, "Out here." He shuffled away from the freeway, dragging his feet and kicking small stones out in front of himself to scare off the snakes that were almost certainly lying about soaking the residual heat from the sun. He followed the sound of the voice into a shallow gully. He woke up two hours later with a knot the size of a golf ball on the back of his head, and without his pants and wallet and car keys.